

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Charles Soulié, ed.
*Un mythe à détruire? Origines et destin du
Centre universitaire expérimental de Vincennes*

Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2012. 488 pp.

Jean-Philippe Warren

Concordia University

Based on a rich variety of sources (including statistics, interviews, archives, original printed documents, and recollections), *Un mythe à détruire?* offers a stimulating historical and sociological account of the tumultuous establishment of Vincennes University in the aftermath of France's May 1968. At a time when the history of European and North American universities is being revisited by a new generation of scholars, this edited book may well stand as a model to follow because of its capacity to present a portrait of the Parisian institution that brings to life the numerous polemics and crises Vincennes had to go through, without ever succumbing to a partisan or egocentric approach.

Sorbonne and Vincennes are probably the two French universities about which the most literature has been written. Yet the greater part of this literature consists of opinionated essays that resort to bold statements instead of meticulous empirical descriptions. *Un mythe à détruire?* stands in sharp contrast to these lyric endeavours. In so doing, the book's contributors (Frédéric Carin, Christelle Dormoy-Rajramanan, Brice Le Gall, Jean-Philippe Legois, Lucie Letinturier, Marie-Pierre Pouly, Javier Rujas, Charles Soulié, Christophe Charle) provide an opportunity to reflect on the changes the French educational system has undergone in the last forty years.

Paris VIII University, better known under its initial name of Vincennes, was created to respond to the rapid rise in university student enrolment in the 1960s. In 1967 there were twice as many students in French universities than in 1960. By opening a new campus at Vincennes, the Ministry of Education intended to relieve the pressure the Sorbonne was subjected to and divert from it the overflow of new students. Yet beyond the sheer numerical growth affecting institutions of higher learning, *Un mythe à détruire?* shows how other qualitative changes were taking place. In particular,

social science departments were transforming the traditional faculty of Arts and Sciences into places of critical thought and political engagement. Such changes fit well with the demands for greater moral and institutional freedom formulated by the baby boom generation. In a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity, the younger French population wanted an education adapted to the values of a new age.

May '68 erupted precisely at that time. A panicky government gave full power to the new Minister of Education, Edgar Faure, to launch initiatives that would deflate the young French people's revolutionary spirit. "It's very simple," Faure supposedly said, "give them money and they'll stop complaining!" In no more than three months a new university had hastily appeared on the map.

Vincennes was to be an "experimental institution," an "anti-Sorbonne," partly inspired by American universities. Many involved in the foundation of Vincennes came from the English literature department and had studied or worked abroad. They gave an air of "English lit." to the whole enterprise. They were joined (albeit sometimes briefly) by Tzvetan Todorov, Michel Foucault, Nicos Poulantzas, and Michel Serres, among other less famous names, most of whom were selected not on the basis of their dossier, but rather of their political motivations and social connections (see the insane description of the Department of Philosophy's recruitment on page 141).

Vincennes was to be the anti-establishment, anti-knowledge, anti-institutional, anti-university university. Some departments (including Sociology and Philosophy) were hot-beds of revolutionary and subversive thoughts (including a very strong Maoist movement) while others were less politicized, but the prevailing impression was that Vincennes constituted the most "red" Parisian academic institution. Even economists were teaching loads of Marx to their students. The short biographies, included in the book, of some of Vincennes' key actors are very helpful in providing a sense of what the university represented in the eyes of the French professorate at the time.

The book shows how foreigners, part-time workers, back-to-school students, and working-class children tended to see Vincennes as a more welcoming place. The majority of its students were undergraduates, in the social sciences, who often confronted downward social mobility (185), ingredients that breed greater political mobilisation. The very newness of the institution provided it with fewer traditions to orient itself. A very young professorate (for example, the mean age of the Department of Sociology's faculty was 32 in 1970) was eager to experiment with new theories and pedagogical approaches.

But, as the book demonstrates, Vincennes' students came to realise that obtaining a university degree was no guarantee for economic success. The inequalities plaguing French society were simply reproduced within the university walls, between students who were channelled to more or less prestigious disciplines and schools depending on their ethnic origins and family backgrounds. Vincennes itself was rapidly underfunded. Its budget per student was almost cut in half from 1970 to 1974 (189), and its installations were increasingly insufficient to welcome the rising tide of student enrollment. Some came to evoke a "third world university," a reputation that was strengthened by the proportion of foreign, mainly African, students who came to

constitute 47 per cent of the entire student population in 1977. The chapter on foreign students at Paris VIII is very instructive in showing the specific conditions affecting their lives before, during, and after their studies.

Whereas Dauphine (Paris IX), also created at the very end of the 1960s, was granted the status of “grand établissement” in 2004, a status that made it possible to be more selective in its student enrollment, Vincennes continues to be considered a more “popular” institution. Yet *Un mythe à détruire?* explains how Vincennes was also subjected to a process of normalization that was the natural consequence of the closing of an age of reforms and revolutions. In 1980, when Vincennes moved to its current site in Saint-Denis, one can claim that a page of academic activism was turned.

Un mythe à détruire? is an inspiring piece of scientific literature about the history and sociology of French academia. Critical of just about everything else in society, scholars are often blind to the power relations structuring their own situation within academia. Denying almost every other agent’s capacity to master his or her destiny, scholars believe in their own personal freedom and untainted judgment. *Un mythe à détruire?* will give them a chance to ponder the influence that academic social structures and traditions have on their actions and beliefs.